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AUTHOR Taddeo, Danielle
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ABSTRACT

This study involved a survey based on a preliminary poll asking children in a Bronx (New York) classroom (N=26) to list their fears. Many children have fears at all levels of severity. The general perception seems to be that in recent years children are more stressed and less equipped to handle fear. The initial poll revealed that children's fears were very similar, and included a parent dying or getting sick, gang violence, domestic violence, violence on television, and being left alone or abandoned. The survey consisted of 21 questions administered to 26 children in a second grade classroom. The questions asked about certain situations consistent with the preliminary poll. Results showed that children attributed nightmares to television violence; most were always worried about a parent getting sick; 19 said they were afraid that a fight at their house would end with someone getting hurt or hit; 12 were afraid parents would leave if the children did something wrong (usually because of verbal threats to that effect); 24 said they were afraid to go outside and play because of gang violence; and when asked to create their own safe place, most children changed their environment, with responses ranging from a police station, to another state, to a clubhouse. Based on the findings, several classroom strategies are suggested to help children deal with fear, including journal writing for the children, rap sessions, and parent education. (EV)

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INCREASING FEARS IN CHILDHOOD

by Danielle Taddeo

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Abstract

Many children have fears ranging in all levels of severity. In recent years, it seems that our children are more stressed and less equipped to handle their fears. These issues are seldomly address in the home or in the classroom. In accordance with these findings, the results have shown that these fears lead to children who cannot function in a normal classroom setting. This disfunctionalism can lead to chaos in the classroom. This article is designed to address the fears of children and aid educators to utilize helpful strategies in dealing with these fears in the classroom.

What are your fears? Do you think your fears are different from that of an eight or nine year old child? In the past our fears certainly were. In today's world unfortunately, your fears probably are not very different in kind from those of children. Fears in our children are causing a multitude of problems that as educators we deal with on a daily basis. We often do not teach any coping mechanisms in the classroom it certainly is not a part of our curriculum.

"A survey of children ten to thirteen years old randomly chosen throughout the nation revealed that children are facing unprecedented fears, many of which were previously only faced by adults" (Feldman, 1996, p.54).

Our children are in crisis and fear is one of the main causes of the chaos we see

in our classrooms. Incredibly, children face fear in all aspects of their lives. Many children do not feel secure in school, or at home. Some children are so preoccupied fearing all that the world hands them that the normalcy of childhood is left behind.

Fear as an Epidemic

I tend to focus a lot of my attention on this issue in my own classroom. I felt that I needed to empathize and search for ways to help the students. "Research shows that teachers, administrators, and counselors are involved with students at some of the most delicate and intimate decision making points of their lives. Their positions give them the power to affirm students worth and dignity or to do students greater harm" (Duhon-Sells, 1995, p. 113).

My students discuss an overwhelming number of episodes that deal with some of our worst fears. As a teacher in an urban area of the Bronx, I expect to hear these things. Each year, however it seems to get worse and children are discussing these issues more frequently. I realize that these fears can affect children of every race, color, religion and financial background.

Television as a Source of Fear

The fear of violence on television is a fear of the 90's. Movies with violent scenes have always been a problem, but now violence is seen in their houses nightly with their parents or on the news. Although when watching a scary movie the children might become afraid, they always know it is fiction. However, now there was another "beast for

these children to battle", reality. The news is real; there is no way out and their anxiety is reality. Many times what they are seeing is happening right outside their door. "Unfortunately, by sixth grade, a child will have seen about 8,000 murders and more than 10,000 acts of violence on TV" (Silva, 1996, p.12). "Children who take in a large quantities of televised violence tend to see the world as a frightening place and grow very leery of neighbors and strangers" (Eastman, 1992, p.1).

Fear at Home

Children are fearful of domestic violence between their mothers and fathers. "In families [like these of my students] there is a higher risk for domestic violence in a home where there is a single parent, step parent or an extended family" (Alger, 1996, p.46). Many of the children reported seeing their mothers hit or even hurt by a male figure in the home. "It is reported that more than one in ten children witness violence in their home" (Alger, 1996, p.46). "Children whose parents are violent and unpredictable create a world view in which danger may erupt at any time. The children continually watch out for their survival" (Caughey, 1991, p.25). Children tend to act out these aggressions observed both in the classroom and in life in general.

Death of a Parent

Most adults believe children do not have a full understanding of death, however, evidence suggests that "children younger than age five do have some understanding of death, particularly when they have had personal death related experiences" (Essa and Murray, 1994, p.74). It is no wonder that one fear the children seemed preoccupied with was the death of a parent. Some of them have experienced it in their own lives through

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some kind of street violence, drug overdoses or a terminal illness such as AIDS. As most people who work with children would probably assume, cognitive maturity, culture (including religion), personal experience, and discussion with adults all influence a child's intellectual understanding of death. (Essa and Murray, 1994, p.75)

Neglect and Abuse

I was saddened to find that some of the children indicated that they were fearful of being abused or abandoned. At times parents who are overwhelmed use harsh language that insinuate that they would leave the child or harm them physically. This is a real threat in some instances; in many it is not. However children take what is being said to heart, and an idle threat can become a real fear for them. "Through normal development processes, children who have been abused evolve behaviors which limit their growth" (Caughey, 1991, p.22). Thoughts of fear stay on a child's mind and interfere with normal functioning. Fear leads to a lack of control of their lives. Many are not able to work in school, or socialize normally.

"Neglect appears in many guises. Some forms of youth neglect are economic and resource- related; some are attention and time related deficits" (Dill and Stafford, 1996, p.36). Many children feel like they receive very little of their parents attention. They fear that one or both parents may leave their situation and not return, either to divorce or disappearing. "The overall health and safety of school children, regardless of where they live or their ethnicity, has declined as problems of poverty, divorce, out of wed lock births, latch key arrangements, violence, gangs, and drugs have pervaded urban areas and beyond" (Dill and Stafford, 1996, p.37).

Children's Fears

I developed a survey was based on a preliminary poll that asked the children to list their fears. Through the initial poll, I found that the children's fears were almost unanimous. It was revealed that their basic fears were, a parent dying or getting sick, gang violence, domestic violence, violence on television, and being left alone or abandoned. It seemed that the fear of these children centered around violence and abandonment. Are our children really experiencing this much violence and abandonment in their lives? "Violence affects student's general sense of well being and self confidence and hinders their ability to learn and achieve their full potential" (Duhon- Selles, 1995, p.113). I am forced to try to understand their fears and find solutions that I could use to ease their burden, at least temporarily.

Fear of Gang Violence

The survey developed was a 21 question survey. It was given to 26 children in an average second grade classroom. The questions asked about certain situations were consistent with the preliminary survey. The fears children had previously indicated as concerns were evident in their answers when questioned. One fear that really affects the children is gang violence. The news of the "Bloods" has been a source of great worry for the children. The focus on the nightly news became the story of someone who fell victim to their violence. I saw my children begin to clamor about what the new warning was surrounding this group. They began to tell stories of attacks in their housing projects to other students. They became watchful and warned their friends, "Do not wear red they

will slash you." In a similar survey it can be concluded that, "children are aware more than ever that not only does violence exist but it can happen right outside their door. This awareness comes at a time in kid's lives when feeling safe, protected and nurtured is of critical importance" (Feldman, 1996, p.54).

And the Survey Says..

Television

When children were asked about reality and fiction on television all of the children were able to discriminate the difference. However they all indicated that if they have nightmares that it is due to violence that they have seen on television. This indicated that violence that children see has a very strong affect on the conscience and the sub-conscious mind of a child. One of the answers to this problem is obvious. Parents need to screen everything their children watch.

Death and Illness

When asked if they were fearful that a parent or guardian might get sick or die, 23 out of 26 children responded that they were always worried about that. When probed to give more information on what they felt might happen if their guardian got ill, 13 felt that it would lead to death. Further probing indicated that 12 children thought it would be the result of a violent act.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence was among the easiest questions for the children to answer. It seemed that the occurrence was quite frequent in many homes. With every inquiry there seemed to be a story that recalled an incident in their lives. Nineteen children said that

they were afraid when there was a fight in the home someone would get hurt or hit. Many volunteered that that person would be their mother. Sadly, many of the children indicated that during these fights they were fearful that they would also be hit. Nearly 10 said that they frequently were hit. The one positive aspect found in this line of questioning, when asked if they felt that their parent's arguing was their fault, all 26 said it was not.

Abandonment, Neglect and Abuse

This line of questioning was very consistent to what the children had indicated previously. Twelve children were afraid that if they or someone in their home did something wrong one of their parents may leave. When asked why they believed this it was always because of verbal threats.

The children were asked if they did something wrong would their parents stop loving them. Not surprisingly, the children who are believed to come from more stable homes responded no. Others with questionable situations responded that they were not sure or yes their parent would stop loving them. It is a sad day when a child can not count on the unconditional love of a parent. In trying to determine if there was abuse in the home most children do not admit to being beaten in the home. A few children were reluctant to answer and changed the subject of questioning. They indicated that they were hit sometimes, however they did not elaborate on when and how often. The one thing they did elaborate on was that they were hit when they were "bad".

Victimization And Strangers

As mentioned previously, gang violence is taking it's toll on the younger children. Their fears are not joining or being recruited, it is the fear of becoming a victim. The

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children of today are well aware of the consequences gang life brings. 24 out of 26 said that they were afraid to go outside and play. They elaborated by saying they were afraid a gang member might shoot them or slash them. When asked if they felt safe outside with a parent 15 said no. Not being able to enjoy the freedom of outside with the protection of a parent is an injustice to any child. These children are living life as prisoners. There is no wonder that these children act out in violence and anger. Their social skills are not even being developed normally due to fear.

The children also revealed that they were afraid to go outside because of the threat of strangers. Many children said that another reason that they did not feel safe outside was because they were afraid a stranger would kidnap them. They continued by adding that they were frightened that they would be killed, and never see their parents again. However, in difference to their answer to gangs, the children did say that they do feel safe from kidnappers with the accompaniment of their parent.

Looking over the children's responses it is clear that the fears revealed are all environmental. Perhaps, when the children were asked to create their own safe place, all of the children changed their environment. The responses ranged from a police station, to another state, to a club house. Most of the children described their place as a place where only they could go to. Adults were seen as threats to these places and, except the police station, were not welcome. The few children who revealed that there was little or no violence in their homes drew pictures of their houses. Very different from the other children, these children saw their homes as safe havens and saw the adults as welcomed protectors.

Parents need to see their responsibility as the protectors of their children. If a parent was made aware and kept responsible for the care of helping their children cope, perhaps there would be less of a problem in our school system with behavior. This all begins with education. Parents and children do not have the skills needed to cope. With a schools' help, a fearful community can turn into a productive community. Without the skill and understanding, we are unleashing a group of unskilled children onto society. A society full of fears and stresses far beyond what they deal with now.

Fear is one of our strongest emotions. As adults, many times, we have difficulty dealing with it. When we are afraid, without the skills to overcome it, we become a victim to it. If fear affects adults so profoundly, the comparison when done with children is devastating. Educators are always pushed and held accountable for the "three R's, however, when children attend school inundated with so many fears it is impossible for them to attend to tasks in the classroom. A priority need to be put on teaching the coping skills in order to deal with these fears. Until these issues are addressed, children will continue to function inadequately and many of the symptoms that accompany fear will worsen.

Strategies to Deal with Fear

Based on the evidence gathered, it was found that many children were fearful due to a lack of coping skills. Many of these children also expressed a need for classroom outreach in dealing with these fears. The following classroom strategies proved to be beneficial. These strategies can be chosen and used alone or for optimal use they may all be used in conjunction with one another.

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1.. Keep the lines of communication open in your classroom.

Let children know your classroom is a safe place. If there is a problem, they can come to the teacher to talk. Children who feel able to express themselves in a comfortable setting will do so more freely when they have a problem.

2. Journal writing

Another way of keeping communication open is have the children keep daily **journals**. Let them discuss what they are feeling. This is a free writing time for the children to write about what they want. Spelling and grammar are not to be done during the reading of this. This is solely for expression.

3. Rap Sessions

A rap session may also be helpful in conjunction with the other two. Set aside a period a week for the children to gather and talk about things they are troubled with. Many children find this helpful, once a topic is brought up they are able to chime in with their own experiences.

4. Identify Feelings

It is important to identify feelings for children and ways to deal with them. Part of the problem with feelings is that many children are not sure what one is from the other. They believe that they are mad rather than sad etc.. Given the proper feeling and ways to deal with it once they are aware of it will allow them to cope when something goes wrong.

5. Parental Education

Make parents a part of their children's coping education. In many instances the reason the child is not equip with the ability to cope is because the parent is not either. Have

activities for parent and child to do at home. Encourage parents to talk to their children about their fears. Talk to the parents association and encourage a workshop on feelings and coping for the parents to attend. Many times with the proper help parents are willing to change and willing to help their children.

Children's lives should not have to be plagued by fears. As educators we have the ability to intervene and restore childhood. Perhaps we do not have the power to stomp out the factors that cause children to fear, but we can give them the skills to deal with it and the power over themselves not to become a part of it.

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